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ABSTRACT

The experimental program in remedial composition described in this interim report was designed on the assumption that students could best learn to write minimally acceptable compositions by imitating paragraph and essay models which have been divided into a series of incremental steps. The objectives of the program were to develop a heuristic method for discovering and sorting material; to control specific paragraph and essay models; and to control the high frequency features of an acceptable written dialect. These objectives were fulfilled in incremental stages with exercises based on tagmemic substitution and embedding at several levels of structure and with pre-writing exercises involving oral discussion, debates, and speeches. Preliminary results indicate that the program produces writing competency and can be modified to deal with different kinds of writing. (Author/JM)

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Models in Remedial English: An Interim Report

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The teacher of composition in high school and college English programs has several concerns, ranging from mechanics and spelling to problems in organization and content. Many programs now in use tend to emphasize one or two aspects of composition, rather than co-ordinating efforts at all levels of the composing process. This is most obviously true in beginning composition, where the teacher often feels forced to choose between a narrow, restricted starting-point and a scatter-shot approach which does nothing very well. There is, however, a productive approach which is generalized without loss of specificity. The materials and the basic design of this program emerged from our work in the remedial composition course offered by the Department of English at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, but the principles which underlie it may apply in several other circumstances as well.

1. Assumptions and Objectives

This program was designed to fulfill several long-range and cumulative objectives which, though limited in some important ways, provided a substantial basis for further work in English composition. Briefly stated, these objectives were as follows (in order of priority):

1) To develop a heuristic for the discovery and sorting of things to be said;

2) To develop control of a specific model for argumentative paragraphs;

3) To develop control of a specific model for argumentative essays;

4) To develop control of an acceptable written dialect, and especially its high-frequency, high-utility features.

The decision to begin with argumentative writing was made because argument is highly structured (thereby lending itself to an imitative approach) and very common in an academic setting, and because argument involves the most obvious awareness of

occasion, audience, and logical progression (adequate evidence, warranted conclusions, etc.)--an awareness which the students intuitively possessed in advance.

The program was designed under several specific assumptions about the teaching of composition which have been borne out by the results of the program during the past two years, although it should be emphasized that this is an interim report, rather than a final evaluation. Early results, however, have been sufficient to suggest that these assumptions have merit and deserve more extensive testing. Briefly stated, the underlying assumptions of the program were as follows:

1) It was assumed that students could best learn to structure their material by imitation of specific models;

2) It was assumed that students could progress more rapidly if the long-range, cumulative objectives of the program could be broken down into a series of immediate but incremental objectives whenever possible;

3) It was assumed that students could best learn the features of an acceptable written dialect by imitation (including copying, substitution, and embedding), rather than by analysis of grammatical structure;

4) It was assumed that students could progress more rapidly if they were consciously aware of the specific, immediate objectives (and consequent criteria for evaluation) of each assignment as well as the cumulative objectives of the program.

It is obvious that these assumptions are not original to this program; however, they do take on specific meanings in the total design, especially since their advantages are not cancelled out in the combination.

Finally, the program was designed in view of several facts about the students themselves, facts which probably apply in some measure to most students in a beginning composition program. Their conscious recognition, however, is basic to the design of any productive approach to teaching composition:

1) The students were inexperienced writers, but they were experienced and competent speakers of English;

2) The students were already aware of many features of argument, including an intuitive sense of occasion, audience, and logic;

3) The students already had a sense of "fair play" in

argument: they knew that rational argument (logos) was not always persuasive; they knew that emotional appeals (pathos) were frequently persuasive, especially in advertising; and they knew that, rightly or wrongly, their projection of self (ethos) could inhibit or enhance their ability to persuade an audience;

4) The students were already aware of the need to adjust to specific audiences and occasions, especially in the oral language but also in writing, and already knew how to make these conventional adjustments at several levels.

2. Paragraph and Essay Models

The idea of imitation is nothing new--mimesis is a technique as old as the Greek rhetoricians. This idea, coupled with the assumption that long-range objectives are best achieved in incremental steps, led quite naturally to two basic argumentative models. The paragraph model, already a smaller step, was further broken down: first, students copied a typical claim-support-conclusion paragraph; second, they were asked to sort out the claim, the conclusion, and the support from a scrambled paragraph; third, given a claim and support, they provided several possible (and warranted) conclusions; fourth, given a claim, they provided several possible supporting statements (statistics, authoritative opinion, personal experience, examples), sorted out the most persuasive, and drew a warranted conclusion; finally, they were given a few assignments with the claim-support-conclusion paragraph model to be sure that they could control both its structure and its logical progression. To no one's surprise, they could.

Essentially the same procedures were used to establish an argumentative essay model, again breaking the essay into incremental steps, of which the claim-support-conclusion paragraph model was one. First, the students copied a typical essay with the model organization indicated in the margin; second, they substituted other transitional phrases for those used in the model; third, they practiced imitating a concluding paragraph containing a conclusion-signal (therefore, thus, in conclusion, etc.), a summary of the essay's arguments (two or three claims), and a restatement of the thesis (a major claim); fourth, the students worked on an introductory paragraph containing an "opener" and a thesis statement. At this point, the students controlled the basic ingredients of the essay model, so they were given several essay assignments to see if they could imitate both the structure and the logical progression of the model. And, again to no one's surprise, they could.

This approach no doubt appears to be very restrictive, and

it is, though at the same time it should be obvious that these basic models have wide application, especially in the academic setting. In addition, it should be obvious that other models could be designed (see below, section 5). In our work with the Concentrated Employment Program in Duluth, for example, we used models for business letters, memoranda, and a variety of reports. Other models can be designed to provide a point of departure for other kinds of expository writing. The point of the whole series is to establish a basis for writing, not a fixed and unbreakable mold, and students at a more advanced state should be invited to transcend the models. The problem for most inexperienced writers is finding some way to organize their ideas, and models provide at least one way. It is not a big problem to establish several models among which students may choose.

3. Mechanics and Style

For many years, problems of mechanics and style have been a major concern of English teachers, but the approaches have not changed much, even though a myriad of new materials has been produced, from traditional to structural to transformational grammar, from workbooks to handbooks to programmed texts. The basic problem, as indicated by many research reports, is always the same: the analysis of grammatical structure does not appear to transfer to writing. With all of this research, it certainly seems futile to try to teach new writing habits by analysis.

In designing our program, we decided to emulate some of the methods of modern foreign language teachers by emphasizing productive imitation of standard patterns, rather than conjugations, declensions, underlining subjects and verbs, correction of errors, and all the other analytical devices that apparently go nowhere. Basically, our approach involved copying, substitution and pattern drill, and embedding, all of which are productive and not analytical. Again, this is nothing new. Fisher reports positive results with a pattern-drill approach in Linguistics and Remedial English, and Mellon reports positive results with embedding in Transformational Sentence-Embedding, a recent publication which anticipates several features of our program. Our materials ran concurrently with the work on paragraph and essay models, but did not interfere, since the models remained a separate part of the program in which mechanics and style were not directly involved.

Throughout the term, students were asked to copy some materials into a journal which was periodically checked. Typically, the journals were collected at the end of each week, so students were copying at least 300 words each day, four days a week, approximately 12,000 words in the quarter. Half of the journal assignments were generated by the instructors,

while the other half were chosen from respectable magazines (Harper's, New Yorker, Esquire, Ramparts, etc.) by the students themselves. The students were also required to comment upon the significance of the journal selections. If any errors in copying were made, the students were asked to copy the selection over. Naturally, this was onerous work, but it did involve a steady kinetic reproduction of standard prose patterns and compressed, as it were, the effects of extended reading into a shorter span of time, with a minimum of supervision and class time. We were satisfied that this kind of exercise did transfer to writing, since the number of infelicities at all levels of structure was significantly reduced (see below, section 6).

In addition to the copying exercises, students were given specific instruction in highly frequent mechanical problems such as confusion of to/too, their/there, know/no, its/it's, etc. Since we couldn't work on everything at once, it was decided that specific attention would be given only to those forms which were very frequent in the language and which generated the most negative responses in the reader. The problems individualized quite rapidly, which was to be expected; thus, on a given assignment, a student might be responsible for imitating the structure and logic of the model, documenting his support, and avoiding confusion of their/there, to/too, plus a few specific misspellings of frequent words. This meant that the evaluator was forced to wink at several other problems which might be developing in the same assignment in order to concentrate the student's attention upon a few. This procedure seems very sensible and could be expected to work. It did. Naturally, many problems remained at the end of the term, but the students were in control of the most frequently-occurring forms, which substantially reduced their chances of making errors in their assignments in Freshman English.

Besides copying and concentration upon highly specific individual problems, two other devices were used to try to develop some specific syntactic habits. Following the lead of foreign language teachers, we set up some specific syntactic patterns and asked students to manufacture a large number of similar patterns, both orally and in writing. For example, if students were having some trouble with subject-verb agreement, it was always because something (phrase, clause, or whatever) intervened between the subject and the verb, something which contained an item of different number than the subject. It was a simple matter to set up several sentences involving such a pattern, elicit some of the same type orally, and ask students to write many sentences of the same type, using their own vocabulary. Naturally, no mention was made of technical grammatical terminology, since the studetns already knew the patterns orally anyway. This technique was supplemented by a program involving the embedding of smaller sentences into larger, more

complex sentences. Kellogg Hunt has suggested (probably correctly) that stylistic "maturity" can be measured in terms of the number of embeddings occurring in students' sentence-output. Mellon has capitalized on this observation in his recent work. For us, there was little doubt that students began to have syntactic difficulties as they tried to relate their supporting remarks logically, rather than simply listing them, and a series of embedding exercises appeared to improve their capacity to do this. Again, it must be recognized that the students already have this capacity in the oral language as native speakers of English; the concern of the embedding exercises and the pattern drills was to transfer that prior competence to their written work.

4. Invention and Pre-Writing

Thus far, we have described the program as it applies to three of the four major objectives, emphasizing the need for incremental steps in each. But its most important objective, the development of a heuristic for discovery and sorting of material, remains to be discussed. In a companion article, Mr. Bacig has presented a broader analysis of the problem of invention. Here, our concern is to describe the classroom techniques that were used in the program, techniques which were called "pre-writing." These techniques were aimed at the problem of establishing a discovery procedure for things to be said. This was not an analytical program; instead, an effort was made to elicit materials from the students themselves as they confronted an issue.

It was remarked earlier that students came to the program with considerable intuitive awareness of occasion and audience from their oral experience. This awareness can be made conscious and then usefully exploited in pre-writing. Too often, students do not write to a real audience; but in an argumentative format, they can write to each other, as in an oral debate situation. The demands of the audience can be openly discussed, especially in terms of the audience's values and consequent expectations. If the audience is clearly in mind, then the students have an objective basis for selecting, from all the possible arguments, those which are most likely to be persuasive.

Another basic idea in pre-writing emerges from the fact that students have considerable prior linguistic competence in the oral language. Oral discussion of an issue generated more ideas in a given time span than writing out tentative outlines, since the exchange and the feedback were immediate in the oral situation. More important, one student's remark often triggered a more useful response in someone else, so that the teacher no longer had to function as a prod or a filter. These unstructured discussions, then, provided the basis for a better-informed approach to the ensuing debate, out of which some specific arguments and specific supporting statements emerged.

Pre-writing proceeded in incremental steps, following the steps for control of the paragraph and essay models. After a general discussion of the topic, students were asked to provide support (orally) for a specific claim which had emerged from the discussion. For example, given a general discussion on the question of college credit for the remedial course (a subject close to the hearts of the students, who were currently enrolled in it), some students made the claim that giving credit was a good idea because the students would be better motivated. The next step was to elicit some evidence which would support this claim: 1) rewarding students was better than punishing them; 2) students deserved credit for the heavy work load in the course; 3) during examination periods, students would be forced to spend their time on their credited courses, rather than the non-credit course; 4) the students were put behind schedule in completing their degree work in four years, which was discouraging. These pieces of support were recorded on the blackboard. Then the students had to decide on the strongest support in terms of the claim, the audience (in this case, the Freshman English Committee), the accuracy of the support, and draw a warranted conclusion. As the students progressed, they were confronted with a proposition (thesis) and asked to produce claims in its support--claims which in turn had to be supported. Finally, general topics like "Industrial Pollution" were introduced, and the students, again orally, had to restrict the topic ("Pollution of the St. Louis River by the Cloquet Wood Industries", for example), generate a proposition, and form a thesis. If the discussion broke down for lack of information, this was a signal to head for the library, especially for articles in current journals. This approach, by the way, was much better than a "busy-work" library exercise for persuading students to use library resources. Finally, the students wrote their papers, following the paragraph and essay models, documenting their sources, and aiming their work at a specific audience.

As the program continued, formal pre-writing was reduced more and more, so that individual students had to fill in the gaps on their own, until finally they were able to confront a proposition, generate a thesis, find support for claims, and draw warranted, rational conclusions. We found that, as the students increasingly worked on their own, a brief introduction of the classical topoi (topics) was useful, especially the cause-effect, antecedent-consequence, and problem-solution constructs, as well as testimony (authority, testimonial, law, statistics, etc.). Of these, cause-and-effect was the most productive of arguments, and testimony was most productive of evidence. These constructs emerged rather naturally from the general discussions, but their formal specification provided a conscious, rational sorting-device for breaking down a proposition and finding arguments and evidence when students were

working alone.

5. Abstraction of Paragraph and Essay Models

Although from some points of view the methods used to abstract the models used in this program may be irrelevant, it would seem that a specification of these methods, simple as they are, might enable other teachers to abstract their own models to suit their particular needs. More important, such a specification would enable a considerable expansion of our admittedly restricted program to cover other kinds of composition.

The basis for this procedure is tagmemic grammar, the slot-filler system. Originally, tagmemic analysis was designed to abstract "formulas" for word formation, phrases, clauses, and sentences in a given language. Recently, however, in an article in College Composition and Communication (December, 1965), A.L. Becker attempted to apply tagmemic analysis to paragraph structure, arguing, essentially, that the paragraph could be seen as a linguisitic unit. This kind of analysis was discussed in greater detail by Francis Christensen, Paul C. Rodgers, Jr., and Becker in a symposium on the paragraph in the May 1966 issue College Composition and Communication. This application is productive because it enables the abstraction of paragraph structure by a definition of the "slots" (such as claim-support-conclusion) and a sense of the "fillers," i.e., the nature of claim-sentences as opposed to support-sentences and conclusion-sentences. Moreover, at the essay level, it is easy to specify other slots and fillers, such as transition-slots, as well as expanding paragraph structure to essay structure, with specific slots defined in introductory and concluding paragraphs, as indicated in section 2 above.

To demonstrate the procedure more explicitly, we might examine another kind of paragraph. In an effort to set up a model for a compare-contrast paragraph, several examples of such paragraphs were examined, both in successful student essays and in professional work. These were broken apart, sentence by sentence, to determine the relationship between the first and second sentences, the second and third, the first and third, the second and fourth, etc. It was easy to show that the first sentence typically established the basis for comparison or contrast, and the next few sentences typically described the first member (person, project, policy, etc.) of the comparison in terms of the basis previously established. Then a "shifter" (likewise, on the other hand, etc.) appeared, followed by a description of the other member of the comparison, again in terms of the basis for comparison established in the first sentence. Finally, a concluding sentence evaluated the significance of the two members in terms of the basis for comparison.

Out of this analysis emerges a model for a compare-contrast paragraph: 1) statement of basis for comparison; 2) description of A; 3) "shifter"; 4) description of B; 5) evaluation. This turns out to be a productive paragraph model, once its structure is abstracted, and it is readily expanded to a compare-contrast essay model, just like the claim-support-conclusion model. More important, the logical progression of this model is easier to manage, since the basis for comparison is available for reference and testing. Naturally, a pre-writing technique emerges too, with discussion of both members, establishment of bases for comparison, etc., and students then fill in the slots of the model with their own material.

This same procedure is adaptable for many different kinds of writing, a fact which is tacitly recognized in the forms for business letters, police reports, memoranda, casework reports, etc., that appear so frequently in training manuals for industry and government agencies. While working in a communications project in the Concentrated Employment Program in Duluth, we had to abstract models for several kinds of institutional communications, since the people in the program were being trained for paraprofessional positions in schools and government agencies. This experience persuaded us that the imitation of models was indeed a widely adaptable approach for many kinds of composition.

6. Interim Results

The program described in this report has not been tested long enough to warrant definite conclusions. At the same time, it seemed that some purpose would be served by reporting the progress made thus far. In the fall quarter of 1968, two experimental sections were arranged (with a total of 65 students, 31 in one section and 34 in the other--an absurd overload!). By the quarter's end, sixty students remained in the program. Of these, 90 per cent definitely controlled the structure of the basic argumentative paragraph and essay models, and about 72 per cent could manage the logical progression inherent in the models. By checking the frequency of stylistic and mechanical errors in earlier and later papers, we were able to show an average reduction of errors of about 50 per cent at all levels of structure: spelling reduced from 71 errors in the first set of papers to 39 in the last, with more drastic reduction of errors in frequently-occurring words; punctuation errors reduced from 22 errors in the first set to 8 in the last; syntactic errors reduced from 19 in the first set to 8 in the last; stylistic errors from 11 in the first set to 6 in the last. Errors in high-frequency forms like its/it's, their/there, your/you're, to/too, etc., were virtually eliminated--from 47 in the first papers to four in the last papers.

In order to get some sense of the efficacy of the remedial program in preparing students for Freshman English, we obtained their final grades in English 1 and a verbal estimate of their work from their instructors. This last step was necessary because of the common final examination in use at the time, an examination in which students' papers (written during the two-hour examination period) were read and graded by two other instructors in the Department. If a student failed this paper, he failed the course, no matter what his prior grades indicated. This practice (which has since been abandoned as grossly unfair) would have made for considerable distortion of the results if the instructors' opinions had not been solicited prior to the common examination. Of the 60 students who finished the remedial course, 36 were allowed to register for English 1 (10 failed to pass the course, and 4 withdrew before the end of the term). Of the 36 who passed the remedial program, 13 passed and 11 failed. The remaining 12 were not able to enroll in English 1 because the sections were closed. Of the 11 who failed, five were doing passing work prior to the common examination. Of those who passed, one received a B, eight received C's and four received D's. This improvement over the previous quarter was no doubt due in part to greater experience in teaching the program and the substantially smaller class size, as well as some improvements in the materials. Moreover, by this time we had argued successfully for the abolition of mandatory F's for students who failed the common examination, so the instructors' judgment of a student's progress was more likely to stand.

In the Fall quarter of the following year (1969), we had five sections of remedial English, with about 25 students per section, and three sections are currently being offered in the Winter term. Although final grades for English 1 in the Winter term are not yet available, we were able to obtain some sense of the students' progress to date, and indications are that about 80% are doing passing work, which represents a substantial improvement over the average during 1968-69.

7. Summary and Conclusions

The experimental program in remedial composition described in this report was designed on the basic assumption, borrowed from the teaching of foreign languages, that students could best learn to write minimally acceptable compositions by productive imitation of paragraph and essay models which had been divided whenever possible into a series of incremental steps. The cumulative objectives of the program were to develop a heuristic for the discovery and sorting of material, to control specific paragraph and essay models, and to control the high-frequency features of an acceptable written dialect. These objectives were fulfilled in incremental stages by exercises based on tagmemic substitution and embedding at several levels

of structure and by pre-writing exercises involving prior oral discussions, debates, and speeches, thus moving from oral to written discourse. Preliminary results have indicated that the program is productive and can be modified to deal with several different kinds of writing.

8. Some Useful Sources

Becker, A.L. "A Tagmemic Approach to Paragraph Analysis," College Composition and Communication, XVI, No. 5 (December 1965), 237-242.

_____, et al. "A Symposium on the Paragraph," College Composition and Communication, XVII, No. 2 (May 1966), 60-87.

Fisher, John A. Linguistics in Remedial English. The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966.

Mellon, John C. Transformational Sentence-Embedding. National Council of Teachers of English Research Report No. 10, 1969.

Donald Larmouth's report for the MCTE Duluth Conference this May, "Sentence Models and Paragraph Models in Remedial Composition," reflected upon the same problem that he and Tom Bacig discuss in collaboration in this issue of MEJ.